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MAIMONIDES ON REFUTING FALSE NOTIONS:
A Letter to the Jews of Montpellier

Jewish philosophy attempts not only to affirm doctrinal beliefs on a rational basis but with equal conviction to refute false notions that tend to distort the conceptual structure of the faith. It would appear that the Talmud alludes to this tendency, when, in the name of R. Samlai, it asserts that only the first and second commandments, " 'I am,' and 'Thou shalt have no other gods' we heard from the Almighty Himself." The obvious inference of the rabbi's statement was that the second commandment which embodies a repudiation of false gods is as binding and significant as the affirmation of the first. Maimonides' delineation of the homonyms[2] and the attributes to which he devotes almost an entire book of his *Moreh Nebukhim* is a case in point.

In the following letter, Maimonides takes on two crucial areas which are often freighted with extravagant myths. The Jews of Montpellier, situated near Marseilles[3] in 1193 wrote a letter to Maimonides requesting that he elucidate for them the value of astrology as a source of knowledge and the meaning of the advent of the Messiah.

Astrology, which maintained that man's activities and existence are preordained by the constellations at birth, was considered a science in Europe. They wanted to know whether this popular science could be squared with the Hebraic tradition. When turning to the Talmud for the answer, they discovered conflicting passages on the subject. Some statements in the Talmud indicated that human destiny depended on *mazolot* and stars; while other passages stated that only one's merits was a factor in life.

The reply to this question involved Maimonides in the larger epistemological issue of the sources of knowledge as well as freedom of will. According to Maimonides there are only three sources of knowledge: those grounded in observation, logical deduction[4] and prophetic apprehension. Astrology was outside the pale of any one of those three roots of cognition, and hence must be condemned as baseless and misleading both as a science and as a religious affirmation. Belief in it is tantamount to faith in idolatry.[5] His conclusion was based upon his study of every

available work on the subject persuading him that reliance on a knowledge of constellations would mean the abandonment of one's reason and freedom of will and the acceptance of notions that are idolatrous. The alleged statements in the Talmud in defense of astrology were not conclusive as they were not meant to be taken literally. Nor do we know under what circumstances they were made. One therefore, must not go against one's reason and demonstrated proof.

The second problem concerning the advent of the Messiah was provoked by the "Epistle to the Yemenites" Maimonides had written.[6] The messianic issue was a perplexing one inasmuch as the belief that affliction was the harbinger of the speedy approach of the Messianic era became widespread, and they were obviously unaware of Maimonides historical approach to the subject as delineated in his *Mishnah Torah.* The first copy of the monumented work had not reached them until two years later.

It is apparent from this letter, however, that Maimonides was very anxious to clarify the notion of the Messiah in the Hebraic tradition and vigorously discredit any bizarre, fanatical beliefs attended thereto. He was scornful of the mystic visionaries who ascribed supernatural powers to the Messiah for two reasons. First, it was contrary to the Rabbinic concept expounded by Shmuel of the third century to the effect that the only difference between the messianic state and the present was that that Israel will regain its political independence and cast off the yoke of the nations.[7] Secondly, a distortion of the prophetic concept of the Messiah threatened to bring the direst misfortunes to the Jewish people. They tended to raise false hopes, arouse suspicion of the ruling powers and lull the Jews into a false sense of complacency depending upon a deified Messiah to usher in the blessed state. The underlying motif of his Epistle to the Yemenites was therefore, "Be Strong."

In the *Mishneh Torah* (*Sefer Shoftim — Hil. Melakhim* I1) he points to his favorite exponent of Talmudic Law, Rabbi Akiba,[8] who "was a great Sage, a teacher of the Mishnah, yet he was also the armor-bearer of Bar Kochba whom he affirmed as King Messiah . . ." The Messiah, he maintains, will be a mortal being who will excel in wisdom and will usher in the blessed state in this world which will continue in its normal course except that sovereignty will be restored to Israel and Jews will be able to devote themselves more fully to the knowledge of Torah, the service of God and intellectual perfection.

Israel has been assailed in three forms, he writes in his "Epistle to Yemenites": By the sword of Nebuchadnezzar and Titus; by the allurements of Hellenism; and by Christianity and Islam in

the mask of new relevations superseding Sinai. He argued that the Messianic era as a natural process of a new historical setting will cure all three aberrations.

What follows is a portion of my translation of Maimonides' "Letter to the Jews of Montpellier," which was addressed to Rabbi Johnan ha-Kohen of the Provence dealing with the question of a false Messiah. A translation of Maimonides' refutation of astrology will appear in a subsequent issue.

L.D.S.

Maimonides' Letter to the Jews of Montpellier:

With reference to the report that reached you in my name about an alleged Messiah, I wish to state that the incident was not accurately communicated to you. It occurred not in the East but in the land of Yemen when there appeared a Jewish enthusiast twenty-two years ago, and proclaimed himself as the forerunner[9] of the Messiah paving the way for the latter's coming. He predicted that Messiah will make his appearance in Yemen. As a consequence, a multitude of people, Jews and Arabs gathered around him in the hills. They listened naively as he deceptively told them: Come with me, let us go out to greet the Messiah for he has sent me unto you to straighten the path before him.

Our brethren of Yemen wrote me a long epistle informing me of his strange behavior and conduct, as well as the innovations he introduced in the prayers and is his mode of discourse. They inquired specifically about some of his miraculous acts which they allegedly witnessed. I deduced from the content of their writing that this man was an impostor, devoid of any understanding, although he pretended to be pious. The rumors about miracles he performed which allegedly were beheld by others, were uttterly false and absurd.

Filled with apprehension for my fellow Jews, I proceeded to prepare for them about three treatises[10] on the subject of the Messiah, delineating the necessary symptoms by which the authenticity of the would-be Messiah and the Messianic period would be validated. I further admonished them to warn the pretender of his impending doom, and the dire consequences that

will befall the community, should he not desist from his pretensions.

To be sure, at the end of the year he was captured and his followers deserted him. The Arabic King who incarcerated him proceeded to interrogate him sternly as to his nefarious activities, to which he replied: "Your Majesty, the King, everything I said was authentic in accordance with God's command."

When the King asked him what proof he had, he replied: "If you will decapitate me I shall be resurrected." The King said: "There can be no better proof than that. If this will happen, I and the whole world will be convinced of the veracity and the correctness of your statements, and we shall moreover declare that our ancestors who had not embraced your God, had actually pursued pure vanities devoid of any purpose and meaning." The King ordered that a sword be fetched, and commanded that he be decapitated at once. When he died (may his death be an atonement for him and all Israel) and thereby was exposed as an impostor, the Jewish community was severely penalized. Heavy financial penalties were invoked upon them, and yet, despite these disabilities, there are still fanatics who believe that this pretender will imminently rise from his grave.

This is briefly the account of the chain of events that took place, and if you erroneously heard that my epistle arrived in Fez, it may be due to the fact that the letter was transferred from Yemen to Fez.

As I mentioned before, all your questions may be compared to a tree which has many branches. I admonish you therefore, to uproot the whole tree and its branches and plant for yourself a new Tree of Knowledge and eat of its good fruit. You will then stretch forth your hand to reach also the Tree of Life[11] and eat from it so that you will live forever.

May the blessed name of the Lord, in his mercy, bestow upon you and all of us his boundless favors, that we may always merit to eat of his fruits and find satisfaction in their goodness that we may have eternal life. May this be his Will!

NOTES

1. *B.T. Makkot* 23.

2. Essentially there have been three approaches to Biblical anthropomorphic expressions. Philo adopted the allegorical method which interpreted Biblical corporeal expressions as symbols of conceptual constructs. The Karaites classified every anthropomorphic expression as referring to messengers or angels of God. Benjamin Nahawendi pointed to the Biblical episode of the Burning Bush about which it is stated, "And the angel of the Lord appeared unto him in a flame of fire" (Exodus 3:2); and in the fourth verse we read "And when the Lord saw that he turned aside to see and God called unto him out of the midst of the bush" . . . apparently then the reference to God in this instance implied an angel as indicated in the second verse. Finally Rambam formalized the method of homonyms which ascribed a double significance to scriptural anthropomorphic expressions—one applicable to man and the other embodying an incorporeal conceptual dimension, referring to the Divine. Thus the methodology of Torah study must entail two levels of understanding, a human, literal one and a metaphysical, figurative, sophisticated dimension.

3. Maimonides reputation spread to France and Provence as a result of some French Jewish Talmudists who migrated to Egypt where they served as *Dayyanim* in Alexandria, and corresponded with their former countrymen about the great scholar Maimonides.

4. The second source of knowledge refers obviously to both forms of logical reasoning, the intuitive and the inferential. *Cf.* Saadia who distinguishes between the two source of knowledge.

5. *Cf. Guide* III:27. The evil practices connected with idolatry according to Maimonides include witchcraft, incantation, observing the times, consulting with familiar spirits and the like.

6. They mistakenly referred to it as the Epistle of Fez.

7. *B.T. Ber.* 34b. *Cf. B.T. San.* 91b. "The sole difference between the present and the Messianic days is delivery from servitude to foreign powers."

8. *Guide* I:32. Maimonides compares one who has attained the highest degree of human perfection to "Rabbi Akiba who in peace entered and came out in peace." Akiba, by virtue of his exegetical method expressed in his notion of לשונות רוביון הן "languages are amplifications," was the forerunner of Maimonides' methodology of the Scriptural interpretation consisting of *Torah* and *Sitrei Torah*. Unlike Rabbi Ishmael whose principles of hermeneutics were purely logical abstract rules, Rabbi Akiba set forth interpretative principles grounded in the amplification of Scriptural texts. Akiba's methodology became the standard for philosophical interpretative development which found its highest expression in Maimonides' exegetical approach to the Torah.

9. See Rambam *Sefer Shoftim — Hil. Melakhim,* 12. "Some of our Sages say that the coming of Elijah will precede the advent of the Messiah. But no one is in a position to know the details of this and similar things until they have come to pass. They are not explicitly stated by the Prophets. Nor have the

Rabbis any tradition with regard to these matters. They are guided solely by what the Scriptural texts seem to imply. Hence there is a divergence of opinion on the subject. But be that as it may, neither the exact sequence of those events nor the details thereof constitute religious dogmas. No one should ever occupy himself with the legendary themes or spend much time on midrashic statements bearing on this and like subjects. He should not deem them of prime importance, since they lead neither to the fear of God nor to the love of Him. Nor should one calculate the end. Said the Rabbis: "Blasted be those who reckon out the end." (*B.T. San.* 97b).

10. Apparently his "Epistle to Yemen" consisted originally of three or four separate treatises which were later combined into one epistle.

11. See *Guide* III:29. Maimonides describes some fanciful myths regarding a golden tree and a stone tree in the Sabean tradition. It is interesting to note that he ascribes metaphysical notions to the Biblical Tree of Knowledge and Tree of Life. A contemplative life grounded in intellectual excellence as exemplified in the Tree of Knowledge, he argues, leads ultimately to man's burning passion for immortal existence as symbolized by the Tree of Life. Thus the Biblical episode of the Garden of Eden reflects the ultimate of man's perfection, namely, the attainment of everlasting life by means of the cognitive process and the contemplative life.